

## **BURR INTERVIEW PART TWO**

0:00:01 Blackmon: Okay, so we left off with Bob, I believe, was it Bob Montgomery that heard “Love’s Been a Little Bit Hard on Me” or did I get that wrong?

0:00:13 Burr: No, you’re right. Harold Kleiner up in New York, my mentor, he was sending out tapes. He knew, because he worked at Columbia Records, CBS, he knew people in LA, New York, and Nashville. And what I was writing really wasn’t what was happening in New York or LA.

0:00:35 Blackmon: Why is that?

0:00:36 Burr: So, well, because New York was starting to become much more urban music and LA at that time, you know, 80’ 81’, was kind of heading towards, you know, synthesizer, a Flock of Seagulls sort of stuff. So, I was writing story songs, and the door that seemed to be more open, or easily opened, was Nashville, in Harold’s opinion. So we started sending tapes down and Bob Montgomery heard it, and he thought it was a hit so he played it for Richard Landis, who was producing Juice Newton at the time, and next thing I know I get a phone call that they want to record the song. So that was my first cut. We gave them all the publishing on it because that’s what you do when you get going, and —

0:01:37 Blackmon: When you say gave them, you gave it to the label, or Landis, or Juice, or to Kleiner?

0:01:43 Burr: No, we gave all the publishing that Harold, me, and our business partner Erwin had, we just gave 100% of the publishing to House of Gold Music.

0:01:52 Blackmon: I got it.

0:01:53 Burr: And that was Bobby Goldsboro’s publishing company that was being run by Bob Montgomery. So they took the publishing as their reward for getting the song cut, Richard Landis cut it, and it was the first single off of her new album.

0:02:11 Blackmon: How did deals go down like that back then? Did Montgomery put that out there, that they needed the “pub” to cut the tune, or was that standard, y’all knew you would do that?

0:02:24 Burr: I mean, I really don’t know. I’m just the guy sitting in Connecticut hearing the news, and everything was a step forward so I kept my mouth shut and my fingers crossed. I think it was a little bit naïveté on Harold’s part. I think maybe because — I’m sure there were people that if they had ever done that before, this was the first time Harold ever had that happen too, I’m the first guy he ever worked with. So I think that if it was somebody maybe in Nashville, they would’ve said, you know, what are you, nuts? We’ll split it with you and they would’ve said

great because you know what it's like Odie, they'll be happy for anything, it's no harm in asking. When you give us half the money, that's how you do it. If you want the cut, you have to give us half of all the money that it's going to earn. And if you're a dumbass kid from out of town, you go, okay! And I think maybe Harold could've held out some, but I don't regret it, it got me going, and every song after that you get to keep a little part of the publishing.

0:3:33 Blackmon: And did — So, and this is all just for people to understand the times and learn from, did — so then how did Harold make his money? Did he take a manager's fee from you then, or something like that if he gave away all the publishing?

0:03:51 Burr: You know, that's a really good question. After all these years, I never asked that — I was never asked that question. I don't know, I didn't give him a share of the writer's share so I made my money, House of Gold made their money. I can't help but wonder if Harold, you know, maybe I'm wrong, maybe it wasn't 100%, maybe it was like 75, 25, or something. I really don't know, I'm going to have to — Harold's passed away, but I'll have to ask Erwin that. But it's a perfect example of just how I came into the business, not having any idea how it worked. How any of it worked.

0:04:42 Blackmon: Sure. So when you wrote "Love's Been a Little Bit Hard on Me," what were you thinking because you weren't in the Nashville Machine yet, say writing for a particular artist, I don't think, it doesn't sound like. What were your influences and were you just kinda to write for you or just trying to write the best song you could, or, what were you thinking?

0:05:04 Burr: You know, I at that point, I was writing very long, sort of complicated songs with lots of verses, I was a little bit of Dylan, a little bit of Neil Young, I never really thought about commerciality at all. But nothing was happening. So I remember, really clearly, I actually said to myself, I was listening to the radio, and I was hearing all these really successful songs where the chorus is so simple and repetitive, like one line over and over again. I kind of challenged myself and I said, I should write something, I should try and sit down and write the simplest song I could, the least number of lines, and just try to say it all and just repetitive, repetitive, repetitive, and see. So I start writing this song, and I never even finished it, because I just thought this is nothing. But, what little I had of it, I still just for some reason put on the tape alongside these other normal songs that I write, my normal style. And that was the one that Harold called and said I really like that song, but why is it so short? And I went, what, the dumb, repetitive one? He goes, yeah, you gotta finish that. And I said, well that won't be hard, there's only like twenty lines in the whole song, you sing one line over and over again. So I finished a last verse, sent the thing to him, and he said this is it, this is the one that's going to get you, get us, where we want to go and we got to take this in and demo it. It was a specific challenge to myself to try and change my writing style based on, you know, what we in the music industry and the writing business now in Nashville do all the time. Oh, we need a song for Tim McGraw? Let me listen to Tim McGraw and see what it is he does and see if we can channel our natural talents into that style. And that's what I did back then, that was the first time I ever purposely did it, to be commercial. And it worked.

0:07:36 Blackmon: Were you even aware of Juice Newton before this?

0:07:41 Burr: Yeah, because she had Queen of Hearts out and Angel of the Morning, and I loved her. When they said it was her and it was gonna be the first single off her new album, I knew her next album was gonna be big because it was following two hits and everyone was waiting for that album. So to be the prime, first cut off of a brand-new album from a hot artist was really the **(??) [0:08:11]** So I was, I liked her, and I was thrilled. It was crazy, we did the demo and I send the demo, it was a mail track, and when she did the record, she copied almost every nuance of my vocal. Like, just did it note for note, my vocal, the way I sang it. She ended up getting a Grammy nomination for Best Pop Vocal.

0:08:42 Blackmon: It's interesting that you were writing kind of Dylan-esque and Young-type songs and then had such good success at your first attempt at writing a, I guess you would say, you know, more simple pop song. But it's so concise in the lyric and, also listening to it musically, it makes sense lyrically and musically that a kid who grew up on Motown could do that. Do you know what I'm saying? It follows some of those rules. Even though it's maybe not the same groove, it's got that commerciality to it that you would've heard on the radio.

0:09:23 Burr: No, it's — yeah, it's kind of a New Englander's version of a Four Tops song, like Bernadette or something, it's the same lines over and over again. It was interesting because I was still finding things out about the guitar, and I was playing the guitar, I was out in the yard sitting on my kid's swing set, and I was playing my guitar and I remember — it was the moment I discovered that if you play an E chord and then move it up two frets, you're playing an F#, but you're only holding down the A, D, and G string. It's a really cool sound, and then if you move up to the A position, it's a really cool sound. So there are positions up the neck where you don't have to move your left-hand fingers at all, but you just slide them up the neck and you play these really pretty chords. I didn't know you could do that. So that's what I did, I made it like a horn part going up the neck with that E chord (*humming*). That's just an E chord played in five different positions up the neck that I thought I had invented fire. I thought nobody knew this, I should really put a book out about playing an E chord.

0:10:50 Blackmon: Well that intro and turn around where the chords, you know, you've got the pedal going underneath the chords is a really nice — I don't know if that was a country thing back then, maybe it was, but it was really cool.

0:11:05 Burr: Yeah no, I tried to make — I always heard it like horns, so we, you know, because it was a demo budget, we had the keyboard player do it on a synthesizer but with a horn-sounding pad. So it sounds like a horn section going, you know, but it's synthesizers because we were cheap.

0:11:31 Blackmon: Well, it seems that this song was a bigger pop hit than it was a country hit, at least chart-wise. Did you hear it either way or were you expecting — and the other thing is, it had a video in 1982, it must've been one of the earliest videos.

0:11:54 Burr: Yes, I — other than Bob Montgomery having his office in Nashville and Nelson Larkin being Nashville-based, I guess. You know, Juice was from Virginia, and she was a pop artist. So my first cut was an entree into the pop world via a guy sitting in a desk in Nashville but it had nothing to do with Nashville. You know, Andrew Gold played the guitars on that?

0:12:29 Blackmon: I do, and Harry Stinson sang backgrounds, which is cool.

0:12:33 Burr: Oh, I didn't know that, that's so cool. Who is now living with my ex-wife.

0:12:42 Blackmon: (*laughing*) Oh, I didn't know that, sorry!

0:12:44 Burr: Yeah, he and my ex-wife have been a couple for ten years. So anyway, no, it was a stone cold, I have a pop hit. It was on the charts and I would watch it go up the charts and id be battling for positions with Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder and Human League. It had nothing to do with Nashville, I think it got in the 30s on the country charts and it hit like number seven on the pop charts.

0:13:13 Blackmon: That's pretty heavy stuff for a guy - sorry, go ahead.

0:13:19 Burr: Yeah, and it was a lot more pop stations than country stations. So for a guy that was making 176 dollars a week as an electrician, to open up that ASCAP check that first time, it was, you know, I was gobsmacked.

0:13:39 Blackmon: So obviously, Juice Newton and that song changed your life. So what happened next?

0:13:48 Burr: Yeah. What happened next was one of the other people that Harold knew for some reason was Duane Allen from the Oak Ridge Boys. He was sending him tapes, too. At almost the same time, it was really the first demo session, the other song on there was this big synthesizer, pop ballad that I wrote to try to get Micheal Bolton or somebody to record it. The next thing I know I get a phone call, talk about your swinging from one end, the other spectrum to the other, that the Oak Ridge Boys were going to cut my song "Make My Life With You." And I said they can't cut that, it's not a country song. And they said well, once they sing it, it will be. That was my first realization that labeling a song before it's recorded is sort of a waste of time because, you know, I always say the song is a mannequin, whatever kind of suit you want to put on it is the production, it doesn't change the mannequin. So, I just, it took about a year and a half later to come out, so just about the time that the money was starting to die down from "Love's Been" they put out "Make My Life With You" and that's nothing on pop, but it's a number one country song. So my first two cuts were a number seven pop song and a number one country song. So I'm sitting back in Connecticut going this is pretty easy, why doesn't everybody do this?

0:15:39 Blackmon: And did you join Pure Prairie League around this time, or what moves did you make? You know, after this happened.

0:15:48 Burr: Yeah, so I did, and I remember that because we did a small tour with a — it was sort of a reunion with The Birds, only that the only real Bird that was in it was the drummer. But one of the guys, the one playing bass was Rick Danko, from The Band. And I remember being backstage with him and he was like the first person I told when I said you know, hey, I just got the phone call, I'm got the number one country song. And he, Rick Danko, goes man, come on, let's write a song, you and me, I want to write a song with you! You know, I go okay, but I'm like so intimidated that I never followed up on it and I kill myself, I kick myself so much about that. But I remember that distinctly that Rick Danko was the first person I told that I had a number-one country song.

0:16:36 Blackmon: Unbelievable. So were you still based in Connecticut but still touring with Pure Prairie League?

0:16:42 Burr: Yeah, yeah. Harold was friends with a guy that was producing them, and they fired Vince Gill, they hired another lead singer. But like the first gig they had was somewhere out in Colorado and he didn't really understand the rules where you shouldn't fuck the chambermaid you're at the hotel. So they had to fire him, and they were kind of stuck. So this producer guy asked Harold if he knew anybody, and Harold knew I loved the band, and he called me up and said you want to audition for this? And it came down between me and this one guy who won Star Search, and I got it.

0:17:43 Blackmon: And how did that — at that time, were you guys playing the hits, were you writing new things to record, was it pretty much the — a lot of original members, where was that all at?

0:17:59 Burr: No, it was a very fallow period of that band. They didn't have the pedal steel player anymore, they had a saxophone, cause they were just coming out of their disco era that they did with Vince, where they did "Let Me Love You Tonight." That song and a couple of other songs. And they were doing a few of the — they weren't doing any of the hits that I loved, you know, when I joined the band and they said, here's the song list, learn this, I mean other than "Amie," there wasn't any of the old stuff that were from the first two or three albums that I loved. So I thought I was joining my favorite band but it be like joining The Stones and saying no, we only do stuff from the albums after 1988. So that kind of sucked, but it's funny, there were two or three old songs that I said you got to do these, so I ended up reteaching them to the band. So we did end up doing some of the songs I love and yeah, it was not a great time. They didn't have a record deal, they were trying for one, so we would go in and do sessions and did several of my, mostly my songs, to try to get a record deal.

0:19:30 Blackmon: I'm guessing you learned a lot from that experience, that would've been your first national touring act and that sort of thing, right?

0:19:40 Burr: Yes, absolutely. I remember the first show I did, I was freaking out halfway through the show because all this smoke is coming up in front of me and going into this vent

behind the stage. I'm sitting here going I'm gonna die, look this cigarette smoke. Every time I take a breath to sing, I am breathing in a pack of cigarettes. And it wasn't until like a long while later till someone said no, no, no, that's the smoke machine, so we look cool on stage. I thought it was all the cigarette smoke from back when people used to smoke at the clubs, but no, no, it's a smoke machine so that we look cool. Oh, okay, sorry.

0:20:29 Blackmon: So no telling what you were breathing in.

0:20:31 Burr: Yeah, it's probably, back then it was probably just as bad for you because it was oil-based. But yeah, that was my first time in a bunk in a bus. My first time in real dressing rooms and real clubs, you know, clubs that are cool enough that you look out and you go, oh gosh, look who's here, that kind of thing, you know?

0:20:54 Blackmon: And so, at what point did you make the move to Nashville, and were you still in Pure Prairie League, or how did that all happen?

0:21:03 Burr: Well they didn't tour a lot, so I had lots of downtime to stay in Connecticut and write, and because of the original connection with Bob Montgomery, he said have you ever co-written? I said no. Would you like to try? I said sure. So he sent up Don Henry and he was my first co-write. Don Henry came up to Connecticut, stayed at my house, and we wrote like five songs together. And, you know, life long love affair after that. And then Bob said come to Nashville and I'll hook you up, and he hooked me up to write with Vince Gill. Which was weird, because I just took his place in the band. But we didn't talk about that, we wrote a really nice song at the Old Shoney's Motel across from the Conway Twitty Gift Store. Yeah, on Demonbreun. I started to come, you know, this was — I was still just with Harold and Erwin, we just had our own little company. I guess we got to keep some of the publishing from the Oak Ridge Boys, so we actually had some money coming in and everybody got a taste of it and it was exciting. While I was still living in Connecticut, Harold got taken out to dinner by a guy named Robert John Jones. Do you remember him at all?

0:22:49 Blackmon: I don't.

0:22:50 Burr: Chuck Howard was his plugger. Robert John Jones and his wife Margaret, they administered all the Rick Astley hits in England and all those worldwide hits, "Never Gonna Give You Up." They had a lot of money, so they opened a publishing company in Nashville called Terrace (??) [0:23:09] Music. But they didn't have the money yet, so they basically borrowed somebody's credit card to take Harold out to dinner, and the next thing I know, I am now signed to Terrace Music, and they're the ones that got me my next hit when I still living in Connecticut, which is the song I wrote for my dad after he passed away, "That's My Job." So that was the next one after, and while I was still in Pure Prairie League, I wrote that song.

0:23:44 Blackmon: Let's talk about that. I was gonna ask about "That's My Job" because I knew you wrote it for your dad. It's interesting that it came out in 1987, so just before the new wave or

what they call the Class of 1989, in which you had huge success in the 90s, but you had a Conway Twitty hit when people like Conway Twitty could still get on the radio just before all that happened. Can you talk about, first, about the inspiration and how that song came about?

0:24:22 Burr: Right. Well, I never really had it happen before or since. You know, I've written songs in just about every way you can think of and had sort of one of each type of song — but my mom had passed away in '81, and my dad died suddenly in '86. He had a bad heart, he had five heart attacks, it was kind of, we knew it was sort of looming, but still. You get that call in the morning, I was always getting that call that he was at the hospital, they had to adjust his meds, can you come pick him up. And this was another one of those, he's at this hospital. So I go there, say I'm here for, you know, Alan Burr, and they say, would you go over there and wait in that room? So I went in that room and said that's weird, and they came out, they came to me and said he's gone. I said he can't be gone, I'm his ride, where'd he go? And they said no, no, no, and they took me to the room, and there he was. I went home and the next night I sat down and played "That's My Job" pretty much from start to finish with a tape recorder running and never changed a word. I sent it to Harold because that's what I do, and I never thought it would see the light of day because it's so personal and it's so long and it's so depressing, you know. He played it for Chuck Howard who played it for Conway and you know, you knew, Conway was a song man. He said, I don't care if it's eleven minutes long, I'm cutting it. And he cut it, and everybody always thinks — they always label it in there when they talk about number ones, but it wasn't a number one, because there were stations, like two stations in the country that wouldn't put it in the big rotation because it was five minutes long. So it could have never been number one, but in history, people think. They go the number one smash, Conway Twitty, "That's My!" No, it was like number three I think, maybe four, but not number one. But it was an amazing thing to have it be one of those. My antenna was up (unintelligible) [0:27:01] a song from voice to tape in a city.

0:27:11 Blackmon: Yeah. What's amazing to me is knowing that story, you know, I was a fan of that song for a long time and didn't know that you wrote it. Maybe it's because Conway sang it, but I wouldn't have said that's a Gary Burr song. Great song, but I just didn't connect the dots. But the melody from the part "Daddy, I'm so afraid" matches the emotions of what you must have been feeling. Like, it's just, it's perfect. It seems like something like that, that's so emotional and so real, almost has to come from, like the way you said it, poured out of you. It sounds that way.

0:27:56 Burr: Yeah. Absolutely, yeah. When a song does that, whether by design or accident, it's an amazing thing. But what I think was in my bones that contributes to something like that is I was conditioned from years of studying Beatles songs that you always find something, somewhere in that song where you give them the repetitive ear candy. I was doing that like when I do "What Mattered Most," like when I go, (*singing*) I know, I know. It's totally different from the rest of the melody and its longer notes, and it's just a little bit of an ear-candy palette cleanser that just takes you out for a second and I've always instinctively done that from years of hearing that, you know, (*singing*) I love you, I love you, I love you. That has nothing to do with anything you heard before or after, but it just makes a song. It was always my favorite part of the song, so

I instinctively do that, I don't even know I'm doing it until I listen later, and that was an example of that.

0:29:23 Blackmon: Did you know that was — and you say that was special to you, but you didn't know that you had written a hit when you wrote it?

0:29:31 Burr: Oh, I never thought anyone would cut. It had everything going against it, plus it was too personal, you know. Who's gonna sing about what my house looked like? I was kind of, I really didn't know the characters down here in Nashville, I didn't know there were some people down here that would buck the system like that, like Conway, would've. Or these days, an Eric Church or somebody like that who would say what are they going to do, shoot me? I'm already rich. I'm putting it out.

0:30:18 Blackmon: So I guess that cemented your place in Music Row and in Nashville?

0:30:24 Burr: Yeah, well, I mean it's certainly made it real easy for Terrace to put me together to write with anybody they could think of. So I started writing a lot. So I started to come down to Nashville like, for a week every two months. Then, that started becoming a week every month. Then, I talked to my wife, cause we had young kids at the time, and we made plans to — where she came down to Nashville and we drove around looking for houses and looking for school districts and seeing if we were just going to move here because it made sense. I always say in my seminars, you can't be a deep-sea fisherman and live in Kansas. So I woke up one day and said, I guess I'm a country writer now, I might as well go where the country writers live. And before it got too far down the chain, my wife decided that she didn't want to move, and we were having problems anyway, so we both mutually decided that we would get divorced, and she stayed up in Connecticut with the kids while I moved down here in 1989. Which was, yeah. I don't know if I had, if "That's My Job" was the last hit I had before I moved, but I think it might have been because I know that I went for a little while with nothing happening when I was learning how to co-write.

0:32:29 Blackmon: But you moved here right at the beginning of the country music boom, when numbers went, you know, with Garth Brooks and Clint Black, all the folks that made that happen. Let's talk about the culture of Nashville and Music Row a bit because you're coming from Connecticut, Nashville is a very different place, back then, what was that like? What was Nashville like? What was your experience in, you know, the idea that it's a good ol' boy town, southern, you're coming from up north, all that kind of stuff? I know you're successful, so that plays into it, but I'm just curious about what Nashville was like and what you experienced.

0:32:18 Burr: Yeah, it was a mix of welcoming and wary. I always tell the story that Bob Montgomery took me to Sperry's, and Schlitz (??) [0:33:33] was sitting over there, and he said you know who he is, and I said yeah, he wrote (??) [0:33:36], come on, I want to introduce you. I go over and introduce — he introduces me to Don, and you know, polite hellos, and we're going



back to our tables and I say to Don, maybe someday we'll write a song together. And Don looked at me and said I don't see that happening (*laughing*).

0:33:58 Blackmon: Wow.

0:33:59 Burr: I remind him of that all the time, 'cause we've written a shitload of songs since and we're best of friends, but I constantly — so you want to stop here for a burger? I'll say, I don't see that happening. But first of all, coming here as an established writer, I guess established is the wrong word, but certainly a writer with a track record, so I'm out of town which was a rarity, I think me and Hugh Prestwood are a couple of people that have done it, but I jumped a lot of steps. First of all, I was able to play the Bluebird whenever I wanted to. You know, I didn't have to audition or play on an amateur night, I could just start playing in the round with people I started writing with, the Russell Smiths, and people like that. You could go to these bars and clubs and look around and see the Harlan Howards and the Sonny Throckmortons and, you know, Kris Kristofferson, or — god, what's the name of the guy, it flew out of my head - oh, Shel Silverstein, used to hang around the lobby of the place I used to write. At this point, I moved from Terrace, and when I came down to Nashville, I had signed with MCA. And that was because of Noel Fox, he ran MCA. Noel Fox was part of the Oak Ridge Boys Organization, he used to be an Oak Ridge Boy in one of their early incarnations. So Noel Fox and Harold knew each other, and that was the connection where we go "Make My Life With You" to the Oak Ridge Boys. We left Terrace and got signed with MCA by Noel Fox, so I was in this company where Dave Loggins and people like that were all writing. So I moved to town and had a little base of operation but it was, I really didn't have anybody to — I was really down here by myself, Harold wasn't here. I was kind of new to MCA, so I would, because I was alone and going through a divorce and single, I would go to these places but when I'd see all these great writers sitting around, I'd kind of sit on the periphery and sort of listen and hope not to be noticed. But I got to write with a lot more people and it was, it was like the legends said. You could walk into any building, it was all these houses. You know, Bob Montgomery's office was just in a house. You know, MCA was in a house next to the AFTRA union. It was something comfortable and off the cuff about it all. It was very Mickey Rooney, hey kids, let's put on a show back then. What do you got? It was a great learning experience, but Nashville was a terribly unhealthy place to live if you're trying to eat well. It had four of five great clubs where you'd see amazing people play and hardly any traffic. I got a little apartment up on, off on Nolensville and, you know, settled in 1989.

0:38:17 Blackmon: So, when did things start taking off for you again? You said you had a little lull, settled in, and started co-writing, and then you're at MCA, and then you have a huge — your career explodes somewhere in the early 90s, I'm guessing. How did all that happen?

0:38:39 Burr: Well what happened was Noel Fox signs me and nothing happens for a year. LA MCA people tell him to, don't renew my contract. Noel said no, I think he's right on the verge, I'm gonna renew his contract. So he renews my contract and they fire him. Now, I don't know if him being stubborn about me contributed to him leaving, maybe he got a better offer because he

went over and worked for Maypop, but all I know is that my guy was gone, and they brought in Jerry Crutchfield. Jerry Crutchfield liked me if it's possible, even more than Noel did. And that's when, all of a sudden, things started clicking and I started to get cuts again. You know, he got the right group of pluggers, and yeah. I can't exactly think what the songs were that got cut back then. But, you know, that was when I started working with Faith and got into the producing side of it as well as the writing side.

0:40:31 Blackmon: And a lot of your success was solo writes, wasn't it? Like "I Try To Think About Elvis" and "Can't Be Really Gone" by - or that was by Patty Loveless, "Can't Be Really Gone" by Tim McGraw, or solo?

0:40:42 Burr: Yeah, I think "Can't Be Really Gone" was probably the last cut that I had when we were still in the old building before they moved and became Universal and moved to the bigger building. That was right during that period of time when Jodie took over. Yeah, "Can't Be Really Gone," the song that I turned in and they hated.

0:41:10 Blackmon: That's Lynn Gann and Mike Sebastian?

0:41:16 Burr: Yep, and Stephanie Cox. It was a great group and I wrote that song and I turned it in and nobody liked it. I think that was, you know, I turned it in, and Al Cooley was the plugger back then, in the last little time we were in the small house at MCA. Jerry and Al didn't like it, they said it was too depressing, I repeat the third verse instead of a new verse, I just repeat it after the bridge. Everybody starts out in the song depressed and at the end, they're still depressed, and they didn't like it. So I just figured nobody's gonna cut it, but I played it out every once in a while. And then one day I'm sitting in a restaurant and somebody sits at the table across from me, and I look up wondering who's that rude, and it's Tim McGraw. Like hey man, we just finished the video on our song. And I go, what the fuck, what are you talking about? You know, "Can't Be Really Gone," the video's coming out. I go, I didn't know you cut that, no one told me. I didn't know you cut "Can't Be Really Gone." Oh yeah man, it's the next single. So that's how "Can't Be Really Gone," somebody heard me play it at the Bluebird, and got a copy of it and played it for Tim, and they just went ahead and did it. That was the last, you know, until we moved to Universal, when all hell broke loose for my career, and I had a decade ol' plenty.

0:43:06 Blackmon: That's interesting you mention that they didn't like it how you repeated that verse and knowing how much you were influenced by The Beatles, that would've been a trick right out of their book.

0:43:19 Burr: Yeah, when you listen to Beatles songs, it's so amazing that a lot of times they do a solo and then they just start the whole song again. Saying the same words, the same everything. That's how they used to do it, I think it's a more country way because you're telling a story and you can't put the person in your song back in Schenectady where he started, that you always have to, moving forward, moving forward. In pop music, when you're just singing, you can just start again with the first hey.

0:43:55 Blackmon: I was gonna tell you, speaking of the old MCA house, the first person I met when I came to town was Byron Hill, so I got to go to the MCA house and write. And talking about that culture, I figure out all you guys hung up on the second floor and had coffee in the morning before ten o'clock. So, when I started writing with Byron, I started getting there at like 9:15 just to sit there and listen to you and Russell Smith, and — I'm trying to think who else might've been in that group, Gary Cotton or Wood Newton or Mark Nesler, I guess it would depend on the day. But I knew that I could sit around there and listen and learn, I was just a kid. And one day, you all were talking about "Devil with the Blue Dress" and you went, and of course, I'm in the corner, no one even knows I'm there, and you said who cut that song? And I went Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels and you kind of looked at me like, who the hell are you? (*Laughing*) But I was just so excited to sit around in the corner and listen to real songwriters talk. So, you go over to, I'm guessing around this time as well, maybe a little before, that Ty Herndon cuts "What Mattered Most." Is that correct?

0:45:22 Burr: Well, I remember what - I know that we wrote, I know that Vince Melamed and I wrote "What Mattered Most" in the big Universal building.

0:45:30 Blackmon: Okay.

0:45:31 Burr: The one we moved to, you know, that backed up against the union. I knew we were in there because I had a really nice corner office where I could look out the city. And I remember that was — the intro to that was a fingerpicking exercise that I used to do to limber up my fingers. I was doing it when Vince walked in and said "what is that?" So I told him nothing, just - then he says wait and sets up his keyboard, then he started playing it with me and we both went wow, that could really be the basis of a song! So, I know that we wrote that right after we moved into Universal and I was still setting up my ADATs.

0:46:20 Blackmon: Wow. You know, that song is known for, I think it's known for, the descriptions in the chorus. Where it's just like image after image, it's like a masterclass in that kind of writing and you reference a Beatles song, in that chorus. Was there any thought in, or can you talk about the process of writing that with Vince?

0:46:48 Burr: Yeah, I've always liked list songs. Elvis is a list song, Can't Be Really Gone is a list song, a lot of my songs, a lot of my success comes from list songs. You know, there's a long history to that, Cole Porter used to write list songs. Birds do it, bees do it, educated fleas do it — it's a list song, it's fun. But the trick is you can't say the normal things. So that was the thing I talked to Vince about. I said, these all have to be weird, we gotta flip things on their head, you can't just say, you know, she liked to dance, she liked to blah blah blah. If we're gonna do anything like that, we gotta say she liked to rumba. It can't just be anything generic. I always say, you never write a verse where there's a guy sitting at a bar drinking a beer. It's always a cowboy sitting at Jack's place nursing a Red Stripe, you know. It's all in the details, it's all in the furniture. So we went, and I remember I said, let's start out like it's going to be normal. Her eyes were blue, her hair was - you think it's going to be blue, but we immediately said it's going to be

blonde — no, no, no, wait, what else could it be? Her hair was long. How old was she? I mean, you go down the list in a list song. How old was she? She was twenty. No, let's not say that, she was sixty-four she was born in. And then we went through how many cities until we found the one that sang the best. She was born in Baton Rouge. What else do you say about a person? I don't know, what was her favorite song? Her favorite song was — you know, you don't want to say she loved The Beatles, what's a better way to say that? Her favorite song was — and then I thought, wouldn't it be cool if we said something where people aren't even sure if we're saying a song? Her favorite song was "In My Life". So many people come up to me and say it was years before they realized that "In My Life" was a song title. They thought I just sang that he sang her favorite song was part of my world, was in my life. I never forgot it, I never forgot her favorite song because it was part of my life. And then it was years later and they go, did you mean The Beatles song? Did you mean to do that? Uh, yeah. Yeah, we did. So that was the fun, that's always the fun and the challenge of list songs. That's why they appeal to me and that's why they are hard to do but always make a song special.

0:49:57 Blackmon: And so, I know it's hard to remember, you said your career took off and it's probably a big blur, but can you just kind of go through some memories of that time, when things were all happening fast and you were working with fame —

0:50:13 Burr: Yeah, I mean literally there was a time period right around then where it felt like I would write a song on Monday, on Tuesday they would tell me who was cutting it, and on Thursday they would tell me it's gonna be the next single. It felt like I went through this period where that happened every week. I wrote "Man of My Word" for Collin Raye, "What's In It For Me" for John Berry, you know, all these songs. A Reba song, "Till You Love Me," "To Be Loved By You" for Mike Reid, all these felt like those Monday, Tuesday, Thursday songs. It was a whirlwind. It was an amazing time period where there's nothing better when you get to that point where a producer says alright, we're cutting the album, go over to Universal and go see if Gary's got anything new. Songs that two years before, I don't think would have gotten cut were suddenly getting cut because of the cache. Artists were coming and going, I really like that Elvis song. Oh, that was written by this guy? Go and see what else this guy's got. And then you get, I've got all the other goofy songs like Elvis that are suddenly viable. And there was a time where I had three songs in the top ten at once and it was amazing.

0:52:00 Blackmon: What — did you start going to LA, I know you had pop success after this started coming to you after this success, did LA start coming to you in Nashville or did you go over there?

0:52:13 Burr: Yes, I was, because they were setting me up to write with people out there, but nothing really came of it. I remember that during that boy band era where they were cutting songs like "I Swear" and "Love the Way You Love Me," I went out there and wrote with all those people. I wrote with the guy who wrote all the stuff for Sheryl Crow, and nothing much came of it because there was too much competition. Everybody in Nashville was going out there to write with these guys. So, nothing really came of the LA connection, I had more success with

the people in LA coming to Nashville and working with me. Like Olivia Newton-John came and I wrote and produced some of her album and Andrew Gold, and all those kinds of people.

0:53:10 Blackmon: When you're having this kind of success and what you've just described, writing a song, getting it demoed, getting it put on hold and cut, constantly people coming to you. How did you manage staying creative and the pace?

0:53:30 Burr: You know what, Odie, I got the work ethic of the Gods. You know, I really, as weird as it sounds, I really have reconciled a long time ago that this is what I'm here to do. So, I get it done. I am not doing this ever begrudgingly because jeez, I wish I was somewhere else. This is what I'm supposed to do. If I have a little time after I get it done, I'll go and have a life. But this is what I'm here to do and I have always had my nose to the ground — you know, I've always had my eyes on the prize. I was writing six, seven songs a week during that whole era. That's one of the things that — I was always aware of not getting distracted. When you're hot, the first thing that happens is that everyone wants you to join boards. Join the CMA board, join the AMCA board, join this, join that, would you do this for us? And I said no to everything because I saw that, with other people, you know, how are you doing? Well, I only got to write a couple of times this week because I had these board meetings and had to fly to LA and blah blah blah. And I just said — and you know what was the best guiding thing? I gave up my wife and my kids to come down here. I didn't do that to go to the movies or sit on a board.

0:55:15 Blackmon: The stakes are high. Man. The — I want to go back and ask you about meeting Faith Hill, producing her, getting her a record deal.

0:55:32 Burr: Okay. So, I got set up to write with a guy named Craig Karp, and he wrote for Gary Morris Music. And they had a little building right down at the split where Division and Demonbreun split. So I go there and I write a couple of songs with Craig, nice guy, and then one time he says — next time he goes, I want to bring in another writer. I want to bring in this new York named Victoria Shaw. I said okay, I like writing with women, I like the energy. I feel like everybody tried harder when somebody of the opposite sex is in the room. We all want to impress the other sex. So I go there and Vic and I just hit it off. We have a blast, we bust each other's chops, you know, we're telling each other how much we suck, and it was like meeting my brother with a uterus. Then we kind of talk and say, next time, we don't need — this is kind of cold — but we don't need Craig. He's a great writer, but why don't we try it — let's see what the chemistry is because it's totally different chemistry writing alone, two people, three people. That was like one of the first times I ever wrote with three people, I didn't know where to look. It's like having a very unsatisfying three-way. So, she and I start writing together — Craig lived out of town so we didn't have to worry about running into him — but I would go over there because she wrote for Gary Morris too, and the receptionist for Gary Morris Music was this 20-year-old Faith Hill. Just cute as a button. And the plugger, the dude who ran the publishing company for Gary, was this piano player named Randy Hart, who used to play for Roger Miller. So, I got to meet Randy Hart, we got along great. I got to know Faith, and we would write songs — Vic and I would write songs in the back, and Faith would always come and stand and listen to us when we

were done. (*Barking*) Shit, so — Odie, can you hold for five minutes? I mean for two minutes? I need to take my dog out. I'm home alone —

0:58:27 Blackmon: No worries.

0:58:28 Burr: I'll be right back.

0:58:29 Blackmon: Okay.

1:01:57 Burr: I'm back, you still there?

1:01:58 Blackmon: I am.

1:02:03 Burr: So listen, if you remember, I told you, Harold — his plan was after I lost my record deal, we'll sell some songs until I get another record deal. So I came to Nashville, actually, hoping to get a record deal to be an artist on my own. To do that, I had put a band together and would occasionally do showcases and invite labels, and never got anybody to bite. Tony Brown said I was his favorite singer, but I'm not a star. But I kept trying. Eventually, after meeting Randy Hart at Gary Morris Music, Randy became my piano player and I had this great band — piano player, I had Bruce (??) [1:02:58] on steel, it was just a terrific band. Faith started to come to my shows when I played the Bluebird and listened to me, and she asked me one day when I was in writing with Vic if I would play a certain song and listen to her sing harmonies with me. So I played the song and she sang harmonies and it was perfect. So I said I'm playing the Bluebird on such and such night, come and get up and sing that song with me. And she was thrilled, so she came and got up and sang. Eventually, she learned a couple more, I said, you know, here's the tape of three more songs, learn these. And eventually, she was part of the band, she was my harmony singer. I was ready to give up on the dream of a record deal but I was going to do one more showcase at the Bluebird, and I invited all the labels, and at the end of the night, everybody left except Martha Sharp, who was sitting at the back against the wall. I got excited and went to her and I said, did you like the show? Oh, very much. Are you thinking, what would you think about a record deal? She goes, I think that's why I stuck around. Would you introduce me to your female singer? And I said, well that sucks, but sure. Faith, Martha. So Faith got her record deal that night at my showcase. Part of the deal was that she had been working with me and singing and recording my songs, singing my female vocals for my demos, and putting all the harmonies on all my songs at MCA and Universal. So they let me produce her album. They actually looked around and asked a bunch of other producers first, and when they all turned them down, they said okay, Gary can do it. So I started producing the record and we were about halfway through, more than that, and it was great. We did a — Warner Brothers did a showcase with her and Scott Hendricks was there, and after the showcase Scott Hendricks called Martha and said, I screwed up when you asked me to produce her. I should've said yes, she's a star. They said, well, why don't you do it now? He goes, Gary's almost done — that's okay, we were gonna fire him anyway. You know, typical label — it will help her to have a known producer listed. So they made her come and tell me and I got taken off the project, but they still kept three of the

tracks that I produced on the finished record that she wouldn't let go of. So I at least got to co-produce her first record and when we professionally parted, she said I just wanted to let you know, there will never be a Faith Hill album that doesn't have a song of yours on it. And you wanna know how many songs she's cut of mine since?

1:06:26 Blackmon: How many?

1:06:27 Burr: Zero.

1:06:28 Blackmon: Ow.

1:06:34 Burr: But you know what, it's not up to her, that's the kind of a pledge that a 21-year-old girl makes that doesn't know how the business works. I took it that way, and it was very sweet of her, but it's still funny to think about.

1:06:46 Blackmon: And I was going to ask you at that point in your career, had you been around enough to know that that's just the way it goes, as far as the labels and production gig? You kind of — you had been around the business enough by then, right? Although it felt bad —

1:07:01 Burr: Yeah, yeah, I mean, it didn't hurt less. But, you know, I've always been able to separate the professional and the personal. I know it wasn't a question go my hygiene or my religious beliefs, it was just a smart business move, and it sucks to be me but I'm sure there are a lot of times when some kid had his cut taken off a record because they had a chance to have a Gary Burr song on there. He can't be mad at me about that, I can't be mad about them for this, it's just business.

1:07:44 Blackmon: Yeah. Let's talk — I'm curious about how you talked about how you hit it off with Victoria. Can you talk about some of your favorite cowriters, and that can be either we wrote great songs together, and or we just have — some of my favorite people. You know, cause there are special bonds to be made.

1:08:11 Burr: Yeah, yeah. I mean, Victoria was always my number one collaborator, we call each other our musical spouses. I always say were like an old Jewish couple, we fight all the time and don't have sex. So, you know, when I first came to town the people I met, to this day, are my best friends. Jim Photoglo, love writing with him, I don't think eve ever had a song cut, but it's always fun. Don Henry, he's always a fabulous hang and a fabulous write. We've never had a cut, but he's just such a great guy and so funny that it's just a fun day.

1:09:02 Blackmon: And a great writer.

1:09:05 Burr: Yeah, they all are, obviously that goes without saying. Bob DiPiero, wrote a lot with him, he and I had a big hit. The funny thing is, most of my — a large number of my hits came from being the first song I ever wrote with somebody. I don't know if that's because you

try a little harder, or what. But most of my hits are either solo writes or the first time I write with somebody. The first song I wrote with James House, In a Week or Two. First song I wrote with Gerry House, On the Side of Angela. First song I wrote with Mike Reid, To Be Loved By You. Then you write afterwards and it's just chasing the dragon and you're not really, you know, you don't connect. Mike Reid's one of my favorites, the problem was — Mike Reid and Micheal McDonald are two guys that you have to have the tape rolling because they'll just sit down and play and sing nonsense lyrics and everything that comes out is brilliant, and then they move on to something else and you go, wait, what about — then they go no, no, no, this is great too. At some point, you have to stop the tape and go three bits ago, you sang something that was great. We're gonna work on that so just shut up. Who else — a bunch of knuckleheads. Obviously, my favorite now is my wife, Georgia Middleman. We wrote back twenty years ago before we hardly knew each other and now here we are married.

1:10:57 Blackmon: And that's — you write as a husband and wife?

1:11:04 Burr: Yeah, we do an internet show every Sunday and every week we write a new song to give away on our show. And they're not throwaways, these are awesome songs that would've been hits in 1998. But it's amazing, the varied — all the different styles people have, the ways they write, they're the people that walk in to write with you and they need to talk to you for half an hour, what's going on with you? Where'd you go to high school? I always say I don't need to know where you went to high school, we're just going to write a song. I always remember the first time I wrote with Harlan, I went to his office and was so intimidated. He had heard about this new kid in town and wanted to write with him. That was me, and I was so intimidated, I came in and I sat down shaking. He looked at me and said, young man, you and I are going to write a great song together. Probably won't be this one, but sooner or later we'll write a great song. It took the pressure off, and I use that line to young writers on writing about the first song. This isn't about today's song, it's about establishing a relationship that a year from now, we can write a great song, so stop trying so hard.

1:12:27 Blackmon: And how has co-writing changed for you over the years? From when you were so — first got here through the 90s, to today?

1:12:38 Burr: Because — trying to think of the way they say it — because of how high the financial bar has raised, we used to get together with somebody and, what do you want to write? Well, I was thinking of a song about a rock. Oh, that's fun, let's write that. And if it got cut, great, and if it didn't, you got enough of those, and you get enough of those album cuts and you make a nice living. Then I lived through the era where you're writing but you're going, who's going to cut that? Nobody's going to cut that. What are we going to write about today that somebody will cut? Because all of a sudden, getting an album cut now when people are selling a million albums, two or three album cuts is your nut for the year. So all of a sudden were being conscious of that. And then that morphed into the whole period where you started to get pitch sheets. Who's cutting? So now you're not only conscious of writing a song that's viable, but now you're writing a song viable for a certain person because they're the one going in the studio. What's the



point of writing a song at the end of the day when you're going, this would be great for Alan Jackson. Oh, he just put an album out, it'll be two years before he's cutting, ah, shit. Or back then we would go, oh, okay. But now that morphed into who's coming up and is frantically looking for those last couple of slots? Then you go and listen to what they do and go, oh, he likes these kinds of songs, let's write that kind of song. Then all the way up through the period where you walk into a guy's office and he's turning on machines. What do you think about this beat, can we write something to that? Yeah, open up your book of titles and start singing titles. So, you're already producing the song before you've written word one. All the way to the point now where you're going into a room and meeting a writer and you're going who's this guy? He's my programmer, and he sits there all day and you and the girl are writing, and when you're halfway through the other guy goes listen to this, and he's got the track all programmed waiting for you to finish the last lyrics and your record is done. It's kind of an amazing progression that, you know, it's fun when you can write with an old friend when you can still say, if I get together with Photoglo, we can still write something no one's ever gonna cut and at the end of the day, we just had a great day.

1:15:49 Blackmon: Do you still write alone?

1:15:53 Burr: All the time. I try to — I'm writing a little bit every day. I'm actually writing books, I'm on my second book, but still — between the song we give away on Sundays, I still with all the time. Even during the height of my cowriting, I always set time aside to write by myself, because I think it's a skill you can lose. I always said, I don't want to get to the point where I have to turn to somebody and say that's good, right? I want to be able to go, that's good.

1:16:30 Blackmon: And with this progression of cowrites, so you still write — you write with people who aren't artists, or are there always artists in the room now?

1:16:42 Burr: No, mostly I write with people who aren't artists. It's a wonderful thrill to have somebody walk in who already has a record deal. I mean, at this point, I'm at the far side of things, you know? Luke Bryan is not thinking I want to sit in a room with Gary Burr. I don't live in that world, these guys — right now, everything on the radio is written by people writing about their life and it's a very commercial country style that I don't live. And I'm not making the joke, I mean I really — these guys really do load up their truck with fishing rods and go to the lake and drink beer and sit on floats and invite girls with bikinis to hang around with them. You know, I don't — In the 90s, I wrote the subject matters that were on the radio. I liked that, I lived the life of the people in my songs. I can't write the lives of those people that are on the radio right now, I have no idea and no empathy for the life of a Luke Bryan or a Lee Brice. But they all know each other, they all hang, they're going to that lake together. So when one of them writes one of those songs about I got a fish hook in my earlobe, they get it and they want to cut it.

1:18:23 Blackmon: So it's authentic, coming from them.

1:18:27 Burr: It's authentic. In my time, what I wrote was authentic. I always say when somebody goes, why don't we write something for Luke Bryan or somebody like that, I go there are other people that write those songs much more authentic than I ever could and they're all his best friends. He doesn't need whatever we would write today, he doesn't need it. No need, he's gonna be around hanging out, having a beer with five guys today that all write that kind of stuff better than us. What I always tell people in my class, you can't write a love song, there's a million love songs floating in this town, and 900,000 of them are written by the Odies and The Garys of the world. Why would they do yours? Well, it's just as good as theirs. Then you're dead, you gotta be ten times better because we owe companies lots of money and they're only going to be getting their money back by getting our love songs cut. So you are shit out of luck.

1:19:39 Blackmon: As somebody that's mastered their craft, and you're a Nashville Songwriter Hall of Fame member, what are you seeing in these workshops you do where you're helping young writers, what are some of the common things that you see? What do you think writers need today, where are we at with the fresh crop of writers? That are pre-success, you know, trying to get there?

1:20:10 Burr: Yeah, I don't know if I have an answer to that. I don't do a lot of workshops — mean, I critique the occasional song through my masterclass and, you know, I used to go and do the songwriting seminars. You know, for me, it's always the thing I always talk about, the North Star. Where I'm saying, you've only got 24 lines in a song and I'm looking at six of them that don't really advance the story. They don't really add anything, they're just words. Or maybe, pretty words, but they're not getting you where you want to go. So it's still the idea of what's the story, of what happens next. All great — I always tell them, you write like a screenplay. What happens next? So there's that, and just the idea of go get swept up in the technology. Back when I first signed with Bob Montgomery, he got his company to advance me like 2,000 dollars to buy equipment. So I bought recording stuff and this MIDI stuff and toys, keyboards. I was in heaven, I could just make my own demos, and after about a year I went down to Nashville and played him all the new songs and he looked up at me and said, ever since we bought you all that crap, you haven't written a song worth a shit. He was right, I was so thrilled about the technology that I was demoing before the songs were done. I wasn't sitting back and going, is this the best it can be? Or I wasn't patient, going I don't know what this next line is. It doesn't matter because as soon as I put something down, I can pick up that bass guitar and play. As a musician, that was a siren song that it took me him telling me that to plug my ears with wax and settle down and remember — like they say in Nashville, it all starts with the song. That's the biggest thing, it's the song, not the technology. You can master it, you can master all the technology, but you know what the big hits are? The ones that stand out? You'll hear twenty songs on the radio but then they'll be one that you can't — that you want to hear again. And that's the one where it's not all ones and zeros, there's a song. A melody, a thought. And you don't have to put them in there, you'll still have success, but people won't hit the repeat button. You want to be the one where they hit the repeat button.

1:23:28 Blackmon: So I want to ask you about three of your favorite songs. What's your favorite hit you wrote, what's your favorite cut that you wrote, and what's your favorite song that never was cut? If you can do that.

1:23:46 Burr: My favorite — but yeah, my favorite hit that I wrote was “That’s My Job.” It's everything about my father, it's my family. The idea that fifty years from now, people will be listening to a song about my father, and he'll never know, but somehow I love that feeling, that they won't even know that they're listening to the story of an electrician from Meriden, Connecticut. And I love that. What was the second one?

1:24:22 Blackmon: Favorite cut that wasn't a hit, album cut, just something special to you that was cut.

1:24:30 Burr: I would say the Faith Hill song from her album “I Would Be Stronger Than That”. It was a song about spousal abuse, and not only is it a great record that we cut with amazing players but over the years, it's very well known among the Faith people and I can't tell you how many times I hear I can't believe a man wrote that. I would've sworn that a woman wrote that song. And that makes me really proud. The song that's never been cut that's my favorite is a song I put on one of my albums, which is the same as never seeing the light of day, called “My Life Is On The Wire.” It sums up my life, it's a bit of a cliché, every writer comparing their life to walking a tightrope, and I'm no exception. But I wrote it in the height of the boom years when every Thursday I would find out I'm going to make another 100,000, 200,000 dollars. I knew that there was — I knew that when the Gary Burr comes to town, the Sonny Throckmorton has to give up his seat. And I knew there would come a time when the Gary Burr has to give up to whoever, and the last verse of that song goes, “One day I will lose my sense of balance, and the crowd will turn and cheer for someone new. And the voice that once cheered that I was golden will tell me when I'm through. One day there will be nothing left for burning, so what will I do then with all this fire? My life is on the wire.” I'm as good as I ever was and I have no outlet for it, and that's a hard feeling. It's a good way to get bitter because I have some friends that are, as the people of Sonny Throckmorton's generation, there's probably plenty of them bitter that they had to give up their seat. But that's not how I want to end my career, in bitterness. Everything I've done, so wildly exceeded any dream I had sitting in the mud at Woodstock that — who could be bitter?

1:27:47 Blackmon: That's a great quote to stop, I'm gonna stop recording.